

AERIAL ALCHEMY

by

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A final project paper submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Fine Art

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THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a final project paper submitted by

Jan James

This final paper has been read by each member of the following supervisory committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

4.20.2010

Chair: R. D. Wilson

4.19.2010

John Erickson

4.20.2010

Alison Denyer

## FINAL READING APPROVAL

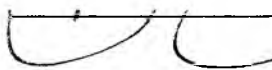
I have read the final project paper of JAN JAMES  
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4.20.10  
Date


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UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

ABSTRACT

*Aerial Alchemy*

by Jan James

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor R.D. Wilson  
Department of Art & Art History

This is a final project paper based on the use of alchemic fundamental practices to explore contemporary symbols, dynamic opposites and elements representing our transformative time. By uniquely combining these elements, color, mediums and techniques into an imagined space, I hope to deliver something rare and precious to the viewer.

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### Documentation of Exhibition

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe the origins of this project to some innate feeling that I am and always was an artist and to so many others who helped to nourish those feelings. Dennis, my darling art slave, has been devoted to the cause ever since I suggested that I wanted to continue my art education. He has provided much more than the many bags of cash needed. I could never thank him enough but I promise to try. It was my chairman, Sam Wilson, who inspired me with more intensity toward my goal. I took his advice to become more aggressively focused and bought some “black leather, whips and chains”. I think it helped and I plan to continue making art with passion. I couldn’t have worked with a better committee. John Erickson was so helpful from the start and he was the one who helped me find how the figure fit into my work. He fostered the idea of alchemy and made it aerial. Alison Denyer began as the open door across the hall and ended up being such a great mentor and friend. I so admire her expertise, experience and wisdom. There were so many other professors and advisors who helped me on my way, Brian Snapp, John O’Connell, Kim Martinez, Ed Bateman, Maureen O’Hara Ure, Joe Mirota, and Beth Krensky were all looked up to and trusted as my artistic board of directors. I cannot express how grateful I am to Janine Evans and the office staff for seeing that we all got it together every day when and where needed, and they did it with such kindness, patience and grace.

Brewing in the alchemical pot of the graduate studio were some of those for whom I am most grateful. Chad Crane took me under his wing when I followed him down from Utah State University. Lewis Crawford, Annie Boyer, Stephanie Dykes, Tom Betts, and Zane Lancaster were so willing to share information buttered with friendship. A special thanks to Van Chu whose generous friendship and talents are treasured. The other grad students with whom I did not share space but shared time, curiosity and growth, are much appreciated for their in-depth contributions and valued friendships.

My family has been supportive in every way conceivable as I devoted myself to this work. My children, Mila, Laura, Trevor, Tyler, Kimi, Nelson, Sadie and their families have sacrificed, encouraged, edited and hung this work. My parents believed in me, and in many ways, I am a product of all their encouragement. I want to thank them for believing in that idea. Thanks to all those who made this educational opportunity at this great University possible. Ever a student, I am eternally grateful.

Jan James



## AERIAL ALCHEMY

## **Aerial Alchemy**

On a trip to Egypt, as I was floating down the Nile, it was easy to envision the alchemists observing the mystical powers that transformed the desert. Black silt borne down the river is deposited on the land when the water overflows its banks during flood time. The black earth gives a rich lining to the longest river in the world and the contrast of that darker, fertile soil is stark against the endless bone colored sand. Cities, villages and farms line the banks of the Nile where life flourishes in that precious soil. It is from the magic of this Egyptian black earth that alchemy emerged.

Alchemy originated as a science concerned with transformative unions of dynamic opposites. From the macrocosmic study of the heavens to the microcosmic study of the earth, from dry to moist, from day to night, hot to cold, and from base elements to gold, transformation became their pursuit.

Searching the material world for base elements to attain perfection brought these early scientists and philosophers to a closer look at themselves. "The early philosophical writings, now compiled as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, were produced in Egypt over several centuries of Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine rule. The multiple origins of alchemy, which pursued both physical transformation and spiritual enlightenment, created a duality of applications and goals as it developed throughout the ages."<sup>1</sup>

Alchemy and chemistry were synonymous terms until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. "Alchemy was mainly a practical science with the same aims as those of today's chemists, namely to perfect the art and science of transforming chemical elements and compounds."<sup>2</sup> During the early part of the eighteenth century Enlightenment indicted the entire field as fraud because there were so many alchemists practicing illusionism and the vain pursuit of gold. The nineteenth century linked alchemy with the occult, and the twentieth century was known for its "deployment in the realms of analytical psychology and history of religions."<sup>3</sup>

Alchemists throughout time were absorbed with refining the human spirit and raising the level of human consciousness. As both philosophers and explorers of their world and beyond, they set out to transform the base elements of the earth into something precious, and in the process, transform themselves. Purity of substance and thought was their first task. They believed they could take

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<sup>1</sup> Warlick, M.F., *Max Ernst And Alchemy*, University of Texas Press, copyright 2001, pg. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Lungman, Carl G. *Symbols*, HME Publishing, 2004, pg.566.

<sup>3</sup> Wamburg, Jacob, ed., *Art And Alchemy*, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006, pg. 223.

the very least around them and turn it into something rare, complex and cherished. In the spirit of the alchemists I explore everyday events and base elements of our world seeking to create a visual dialogue concerned with cultivating the truly precious.

## Chapter 1

### SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

#### History and Application

Symbolism played a major role in the study of alchemy because the language of alchemy was designed to be intricate and guarded. “You need to have a complex language to analyze complex ideas.”<sup>1</sup> By creating a complex system the alchemists were able to keep their information for themselves. There are often multiple symbols for even one basic element and the symbol may change depending upon the context. Symbols used in language and signs for the planets were taken into the study of astronomy and astrology. Science and chemistry still use many of the alchemical symbols. These symbols cross the borders of language and communicate in the same way that a picture does. In a split second our eye beholds an image and delivers to us a story, a narrative, emotional content or immediate complex information. A good example is the symbol to represent the heart. This simple little symbol when seen, carries with it a host of meanings like love, romance, loneliness, mother, faith,...etc.

#### Value of Symbols

Symbols or pictograms are the “primal matter” in my present work. The value of instant visual information for communication and understanding is basic to our survival so we connect to symbols easily and comfortably. Human beings have evolved drawing pictures and gaining nourishment from them. As John Berger said in *Ways of Seeing*, “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.”<sup>2</sup> Children begin by scribbling in the dirt with a stick. Cave paintings are the earliest pictographic writing system. Iconotropism, (turning toward pictures), hypothesizes that “Human beings feed on pictures, metabolize them---turn them into nourishment--- because we need the knowledge they provide. We turn toward pictures when they are available, we imagine them if they’re not, and we produce them if we can.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Thornton, Sarah. *Seven Days In The Art World*. W.W. Norton and Company Inc, 2008, pg. 170.

2 Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, pg.7.

3 Spolsky, Ellen. *Iconotropism*. University Presses, 2010, pg. 16.

## **Visual Language in the Work**

I set out to discover the basic elements and visual language of our time by collecting the signs associations and symbols that represent our contemporary world. Symbols of the natural environment and its many current issues may be pictured as leaves, branches or organic forms. Architectural elements that may represent home, religion or government are often taken from my own photographs of windows, doors, roof lines and architectural details. Signs and symbols are gathered as I travel through communities and study history, geography and societies. Gears, switches, cords and mechanical symbols of past industry are mingled with the on-off circles, refresh arrows and ipods of the new technology. These symbols often make strong connections to the body and our own personal experiences.

## DYNAMIC OPPOSITES

### Combinations

In this work I set out to command attention by making decisions that will contrast each component of the piece and engage us more fully in trying to solve the visual puzzles. Juxtaposing one element against another creates a visual volatility and heightened awareness. The contrast of a mark that is obviously man made against an automatic or organic one is provoking. A flat contained geometric shape next to a symbol that appears to recede in space and melt into another figure forces the viewer to search for his own solution. The use of figure ground reversal causes our mind to be more engaged because it confuses our brain and we have to look more carefully to figure out what is going on. There is a shift in our thinking because the cognitive process is shorted out. We must become more perceptually engaged and involved longer in the image thus increasing our enjoyment.

### Visual Contrast

I am drawn to the visual contrast created by combining water color, gouache and acrylic paints to emphasize their unique properties. Watercolor pigments create a transparency deviating from opaque gouache and acrylic mediums. Clear staining watercolor washes are juxtaposed against granular ones that leave textured patterns and sediment like receding surf as the water dries. Acrylics vary in gloss and mat but retain their filmy plastic feel when laid parallel to milky soft and marbled gouache.

Like the alchemist, I work with ground and powdered earth. My color pigments are made from stones like, *hematite*, *genuine lapis lazuli* or *turquoise*. I may contrast these more organic colors with shimmering metallics of *gold*, *silver*, or *copper*. *Oxides*, *chromium*, *cadmiums*, *cobalt* and *zinc* are chemical compounds that are mixed and used next to man made colors of *Napthol red*, *quinacridone* or *Hansa yellows*. These may be mixed to get the desired paint colors and results. I experiment by crushing, pouring, dropping, and mixing each medium into a variety of techniques. I add marble dust, salt, alcohol, pearlescent powders and other chemicals that are sanded, pressed and stamped to alter and manipulate the pigments. My process simulates the thrill of tending to simmering, spitting paint pots. The smell, touch and visceral qualities of the paint are beguiling. Like potions, the paints are intriguing, beautiful and mysterious to me as I work to manage each one. When I am mixing the right color, getting the right consistency

and grappling with the challenge in application it take me back to some primal moment of origin. These are the basic joys experienced as I cultivate the language of alchemy.

### **Directional Confrontations**

Contrasting direction of movement is paramount in this work and preliminary drawings are an important part of constructing the rhythm for each piece. I try to create the feeling of flight and see speed as a language common to our contemporary life style. I begin with a vortex attacked intermittently by significant figures and arrows that will deviate and redirect the viewer's eye creating a visual staccato. Value direction and contrast is important to the success of the energetic movement in this work. Giving a strong slant to a heavy dark shape that appears to defy gravity because it is propped up by a vast light area can inspire a feeling of excitement. The stream of textured and detailed shapes traveling through the picture plane inspires the greatest feeling of movement and cohesiveness. I enjoy creating the intimate micro moments of these smaller confrontations.

### **Associations**

Shapes and objects are invented by overlapping and layering familiar forms and symbols until they become only associations of something familiar. Leaf shapes layered on top of chairs or buildings on television sets create ambiguity with a hint of familiarity. Identifiable forms are turned into something not so identifiable by changing their context into something opposite of where they belong rationally. Heavy marbleized pillars turn into clouds, corridors lead to the gear driven moon and icons of our age hurl into space. These shapes may be linked together with cords, roots or hoses making them part of a bigger outlined area.

## Chapter 3

### OBJECTS AND ELEMENTS

#### The Human Dynamic

Alchemy's early study of opposites led to a close look at gender and humanity. Alchemists assigned gender identities to the sun (male) and the moon (female), gold (male) and silver (female), also the elements of mercury (male) and sulphur (female). They were looking for perfection and believed that a combination of these genders in a kind of Hermetic Androgyne would be flawless. They fused and separated, mixed and crushed, searching for a basic faultless unit of primal mater that would contain both the male and female elements. They believed that if found, this mater would give birth to the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life which would give eternal life.

During my first year in the MFA program at the University of Utah, I was a frustrated landscape painter trying to incorporate the figure. I was encouraged to drop the figure at times but could not because I felt that I would be missing my link to the landscape. I wanted to represent my space. I had been looking closely at leaves and the symbol of the family tree when I decided to cut a figure from light weight paper, curl it, and paint from it as if it were a leaf. Now the figures have taken on leaf-like characteristics of weightless freedom, fragility and vulnerability. Accordingly, they fall, blow, float and pile up in countless numbers. These are the symbols of humanity which for me are the linkage of paper to wood, and wood to tree with roots to the human family tree. I felt I had found a symbol, both male and female, representing humanity in a very general way that fit well into my landscapes. These figures are simple enough that they can be transformed into organic, architectural or technological elements. They can represent something symbolic, like the wood grain pattern, or more individual and cultural, like Egyptian glyphs.

#### Color

The transformative powers of color are considered before I begin each painting and a palette is chosen for each piece relating to its particular subject matter. In the piece, *Salt*, figure #2, for example, I chose colors represented in the facets of a crystal of salt I had saved from the Dead Sea. The salt colors were juxtaposed with red from the roof tops of Amsterdam where I found the repetition of a row of their roofs very interesting. *Clay*, figure #6, was named for the color that reminded me of the red clay I sculpt with. *Mercury*, figure # 2, was a color composition using reds for the color vermillion which was synonymous



with the god Mercury in alchemy. Colors are selected with color theory in mind because “colors present themselves in continuous flux, constantly related to changing neighbors and changing conditions.”<sup>1</sup> I plan a warm color next to a cool one or a neutral color against one of intensity. Simultaneous color contrast, reversed grounds, and other optical mixtures are explored in the paintings. I keep a record of what colors have been used and what colors work well together as I continue to look for unique combinations.

## Layers

Favorite artists like Klimt, who juxtaposed flat decorative pattern with realism, and Van Gogh, with his brilliant color and movement, were early influences. Today the layered works of contemporary artists like Tomma Abts and Julie Mehretu are an inspiration to me. They work with great rigor and complexity making exhaustive and disciplined layers. I like to shatter the picture plane by creating ambiguous layers in an attempt to represent our present atmosphere. It is fast-moving and ever changing. There is a feeling of weighty chaos in the heavily layered areas of the work which move to empty voids where you get the feeling of flight and freedom. Depth may be absent in modernist shapes on the flat surface of the paper or represented in traditional methods of size reduction. The figures twist, curl, project and recede in space, overlapping one another and challenging traditional perspectives.

This atmosphere of energy and enchantment reminds me of flying carpets. These paintings have that feel for me. Each of my works is put together like a jig-saw puzzle. I hunt for the right color, pattern, medium, technique and application for each shape. I seek an asymmetrical balance of modernism, historical and distinctive forms. My paintings are worked on right side up and upside down, spinning and moving from easel to table often as I seek the rhythm for each piece. These pieces may be hung horizontally or vertically because that is the way they are solved. If placed on the floor we could view them from any side like a unique carpet.

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<sup>1</sup> Albers, Joseph. *The Interaction of Color*. Yale University Press, 2006, pg. 5.

## Chapter 4

### DEFINING THE AERIAL SPACE

#### Atmosphere

My paintings become amalgams and everyday events infused into the wholeness of an imagined space that represents our present landscape. Atmosphere and perspective are out of the ordinary because “the mind can go beyond meaning, beyond representation, to reach for presence.”<sup>1</sup> It is a connectedness to our present state that I am looking for, sharing with the viewer a feeling of this transformative time, this wireless globalized environment where, “a pivotal historical perceptual change is taking place among us, making the abyss between past and present modes of perception greater than ever before in terms of attention, translation, forms, aesthetics, and production.”<sup>2</sup>

#### Our Wireless World

Our relationships are becoming more and more airborne. We have satellite transmissions and un-tethered televisions; wireless laptop computers; cell phones and particularly smart phones, DVDs and game players, ipads and ipods, credit cards and ATM cards, digital cameras, and scanners, to name a few. A great part of who we are and how we live is affected by the airborne scenery of our present landscape.

Facebook, websites and blogs have made it possible for us to know and see the many personal ins and outs of a stranger's life. However, we talk far less face to face, missing the warm authenticity of relationships. We are able to instantly contact loved ones around the globe and travel to meet distant peoples in a way that connects us more than ever before, but we know less about our neighbors. Are we witnessing mankind's impending existentialism? I am interested in this connect and disconnect. My figures are distanced from each other emotionally and in narrative, yet connected topographically to deal with the paradoxical shift from complicity to alienation, joyful intimacy to excruciating loneliness. My paintings are a celebration of our times, and a condemnation of our times.

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1 Bell, Julian. *What is Painting?* Thames and Hudson, pg. 237.

2 Pujol, Ernesto. *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, edited by Steven Henry Madoff, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009, pg.3.

## CONCLUSION

This body of work is concerned with the current landscape of our transformative time and how we might make something truly precious. What do we value? How do we make what we do special? How does art play a part in it? I do not know that I can answer those questions for anyone else, but my work is part of the process that answers those questions for me. It is a celebration of the opposition in all things that determines what we treasure. Our past, present and future are the amalgams we work with. If there is enough fire, pressure and effort exerted, we may very well discover that which is rare and precious.

## AERIAL ALCHEMY



### EXHIBITION STATEMENT

Alchemists throughout time were both philosophers and explorers of their material world. They set out to transform the base elements of the earth into something precious, and in the process, transform themselves. Like the alchemists, I work with ground and powdered pigments made of earth. Colors like genuine lapis lazuli, hematite, and “mars” black conjure up images of simmering, spitting paint pots that need to be stirred. Materials both simple and rare become images fixed on paper and in the mind. Compounding matter into new forms, I strive to reflect our everyday events and the spaces around us, for we are all living in a time of transformation.

This body of work uses symbols which mingle architectural, natural and historical elements to emphasize the contrasts in our present day world. The movement this creates is the result of juxtaposing components against each other. My paintings are worked on right-side-up and upside-down---spinning and moving from easel to table and back as I seek the rhythm for each piece. Leaf-like human figures are incorporated as symbols of the fragility of human existence within our vast and complex environment. These air-borne human shapes twist, curl, project and float through a world of symbolic forms and meanings, conveying our common experience of both connection and disconnection with our environment.

My paintings become amalgams of objects and everyday events infused into the wholeness of an imagined space. In creating these pieces, I am drawn to the visual contrast created by combining water color, gouache and acrylic paints to emphasize transparency and opacity. I experiment by crushing, pouring, dropping, and mixing each medium into a variety of techniques. Heavy pillars turn into clouds, corridors lead to the gear driven moon, and icons of our age hurl into space. It is in this volatility that I discover the wonder of the world around me. In the spirit of the alchemists who explored the transformational processes of separation and joining, I hope that we can all discover that which is truly precious.

DOCUMENTATION OF EXHIBITION IMAGES



**Sulphur**, acrylic, watercolor, gouache on BFK Reeves paper, 29"x 41", 2010.



**Salt**, acrylic, watercolor, gouache on BFK Reeves paper, 29"x 41", 2010.





**Mercury**, acrylic, watercolor, gouache on BFK Reeves paper, 29"x 41", 2010.



**Wood**, acrylic, watercolor, gouache on BFK Reeves paper, 29"x 41", 2010.



**Amalgamate**, acrylic, watercolor, gouache on BFK Reeves paper, 29"x 41", 2010.



**Clay**, acrylic, watercolor, gouache on BFK Reeves paper, 24"x 20", 2009.





**Compose**, 2009, acrylic and watercolor on Arches 140lb.cold pressed watercolor paper, 12"x 16."



**Figures I**, oil on board, 24"x 16", 2010.





**Figures II**, oil on board, 24"x 16", 2010.



**Figures III**, oil on board, 24"x 16", 2010.



**Figures IV**, oil on board, 24"x 16", 2010.



**Beginnings I**, acrylic, prismacolor and oil on board, 16"x 24", 2010.



**Beginnings II**, acrylic, prismacolor and oil on board, 18"x 25", 2010.



**Leaf Figure I**, watercolor on Arches 300lb. cold pressed watercolor paper, 8"x 6 1/2", 2009.



**Leaf Figure II**, watercolor on Arches 300lb. cold pressed watercolor paper, 18"x 15", 2009.



**Leaf Figures III**, watercolor on Arches 140lb. cold pressed watercolor paper, 23"x 18", 2009.



## DOCUMENTATION OF EARLY WORK



**Candid Cosmos**, watercolor, acrylic, and Prismacolor pencil on Arches 140lb. cold pressed watercolor paper, 21"x 30", 2009.



**Autumn Gallery**, watercolor on Arches 140lb. cold pressed watercolor paper, 21"x 30", 2009.



**Autumn Vibrations**, watercolor, acrylic and Prismacolor pencil on Arches 140lb. cold pressed watercolor paper, 12"x 16", 2008.

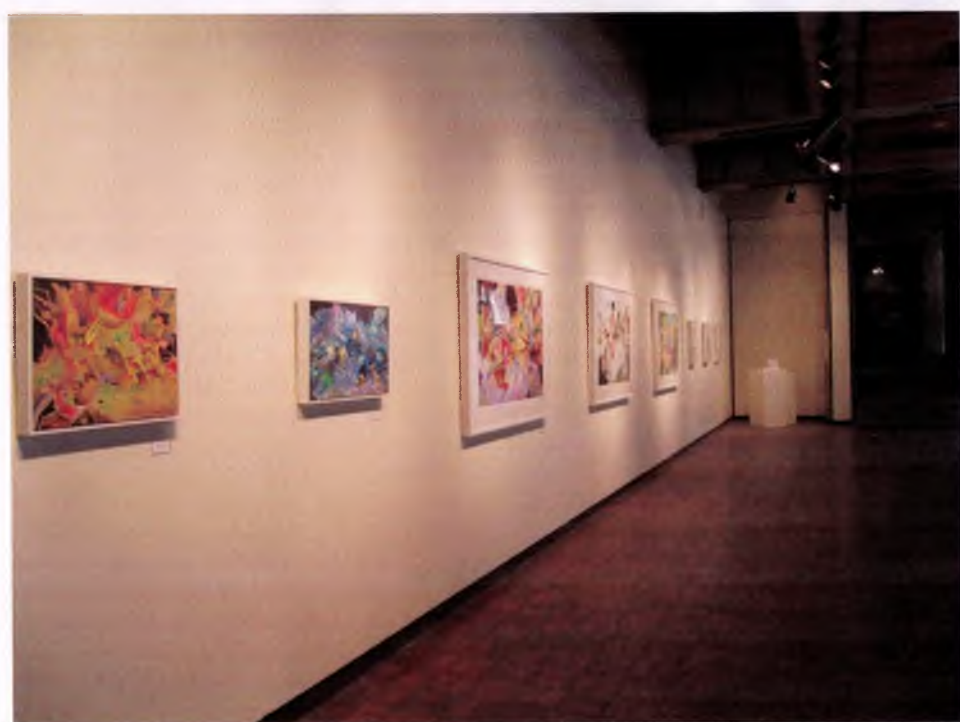


## DOCUMENTATION OF EXHIBITION











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